

“Listen to the regions to close the Indigenous education gap in remote schools,” ACU researcher

Improving the education standards of Indigenous school children in remote parts of Australia is “not a mystery” and can “start now”, according to an Australian Catholic University researcher.

Across Australia, school attendance rates are 82.3% for Indigenous students and 92.5% for non-Indigenous students, representing a gap of 10.2 percentage points (source: ACARA).

The education gap is most prominent in very remote areas where the attendance rate for Indigenous students drops to about 65% (source: closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/education).

Australian Catholic University (ACU) Institute for Positive Psychology and Education researcher Dr Anthony Dillon said it was time for the “top-down” “city-led” approaches to end.

Dr Dillon visited remote communities last year and said, “Everyone agrees that education is the key to progress. We don’t need more reports telling us this – we need action.”

He continued that educators and policy makers should immediately tap into the rich experience of community elders and leaders if we are to see greater school engagement in remote communities.

“An understanding of the uniqueness of the Indigenous culture in question is paramount in remote communities. School staff need to employ and work with locals to understand this local culture,” Dr Dillon said.

“The school principals and teachers also have an incredible depth of work knowledge. These educators need to be considered as experts and treated as such.”

Dr Dillon added that school attendance rates need to be addressed in a two-pronged approach by focusing on issues inside the school gate (such as hiring good teachers who are supported by mentors) and outside the school gate (including community cohesion and employment opportunities for parents).

“When considering how best to recruit and retain the best teachers, a lot of care needs to be taken. It isn’t enough to pay them big dollars. Consideration needs to be given to their social and emotional needs—the educators’ workplace is the students’ learning space. The educators need support and mentoring”.

“Teaching in a remote community can be incredibly rewarding, but it does also carry challenges”.

“This is why it’s important for new teachers to be well-supported, receive peer mentoring, and be given opportunities to learn about local culture”.

“In addition to any program for improving school attendance and engagement should be programs that empower and support the parents.”

He added that overly negative, catastrophic-style language about current Indigenous education standards was not helpful. Problems can be discussed but community strengths should be acknowledged.

Dr Dillon's recommendations based on consultation with community leaders and educators include but are not limited to:

- Installing, developing and adhering to a yearly school calendar that includes cultural and sporting events without belittling the importance, demand and significance of education;
- A minimum work placement of three years for educators hired for remote schools so they become part of the community;
- School nurses employed to improve attendance rates (skin infections, for example, are a common problem in some remote Indigenous schools);
- Educators communicate with the students' parents to keep them fully-informed;
- Educators participating in Indigenous community events to improve cultural understanding and relationships;
- Taking the children out of the classroom occasionally to 'go bush' for outdoors learning and cultural experiences;
- Equipping new teachers with basic bush survival training (first aid, four-wheel driving), as well as a detailed briefing on their new environment.

ACU Researcher Dr Anthony Dillon is available for interview.

Photograph available on request.

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